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WITNESSING WALDEN

By Raymond Adams
(Presidential Address, The Thoreau Society, Concord, Massachusetts, July 10, 1954)

Oliver Wendell Holmes, writing about an old vehicle and writing when Walden was a very new book indeed, mentioned centennials: --

"Little of all we value here
Wakes on the morn of its hundredth year
Without both feeling and looking queer.
In fact, there's nothing that keeps its youth,
So far as I know, but a tree and truth.
(This is a moral that runs at large;
Take it. -- You're welcome. -- No extra charge.)"

Of course Mr. Holmes himself reached almost his hundredth year without feeling or looking queer -- and his son and namesake repeated the performance just to prove that New Englanders have a streak of unorthodoxy about them and pay no attention to what the Bible says about three score years and ten, or even four score years. But, except for New Englanders and trees (whose limbs get a little stiff, but whose heads keep clear), Holmes was right. Truth does reach its hundredth year without looking queer. And the centennial of a book is a good measure of the amount of truth the book contained when it was written.

Almost every American book published in 1854 and remembered even to the extent of having its title listed in histories of literature a hundred years after looks decidedly queer now. There are only about ten 1854 American books remembered at all. Half of them are novels which nobody reads any more: The Lamplighter by Maria S. Cummins, Tempest and Sunshine by Mary J. Holmes, Leather Stocking and Silk and The Virginia Comedians both by John Esten Cooke, and Woodcraft by William Gilmore Simms.

There wasn't enough truth in them to make them live. In 1854 Bayard Taylor published Poems of the Orient, and we do still remember the "Bedouin Song" that appeared there, though we shall hardly remember it (in the poet's words)

Till the sun grows cold,
And the stars are old,
And the leaves of the Judgment Book unfold!

Whittier wrote "Maud Muller" and the poem "Burns" that year and published a book called Literary Recollections and Miscellanies, obviously not considering the year very auspicious, though we have not forgotten the two poems. We should not have forgotten Lowell's "The Windharp" either, but I fear we have. As for the others, perhaps it is just as well that we have forgotten Yankee Among the Mermaids (William E. Burton) The Life and Sayings of Mrs. Partington (Benjamin P. Shillaber) and "Old Uncle John Rosser and the Billy Goat" (Joseph Glover Baldwin). As usual, it is the single poems, only a few in 1854 by American poets, which have lived best; and they have lived because truth goes into a poem. Whittier wrote his "Burns" in grateful honest tribute to the most influential reading of his youth, and Lowell in "The Windharp" poured out his grief after the early death of lovely Maria White. One other piece of American literature of 1854 must be mentioned. Alone in the year it rivals Walden in immortality; and I think it is more current now and better known even than Walden; it appeared in a perfect setting and its loveliness has not diminished during its century. People who have never read a word of it know its every word by heart. It is, of course, Stephen Foster's "Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair" whose hair in a hundred years has not grayed a particle and whose words live still because it does contain a great truth that does not yet look queer, the fact that all of us can still "dream of Jeanie."

But among prose products of 1854 Walden surely in 1954 stands alone. Admittedly, 1854 was an easier year to be paramount in that 1850 would have been with The Scarlet Letter as a competitor, or 1851 with Moby Dick, or 1852 with Uncle Tom's Cabin, or the year after Walden when in 1855 Leaves of Grass sprouted and began its growth. What a decade! Walden came in the nick of time to make its year memorable. Thoreau's book achieved a splendid isolation by the accident of history. Like its author, unrecognized for its true worth at the time, it stands in its year almost an unsocial book, not because it stood aloof from its fellow books, but because it happened that no book of great consequence stood with it that year.

Actually, a good many books of 1854 seemed important in 1854. Walden was not among them in general opinion, nor indeed were some of the other books now mentioned in the histories of literature. In that, Walden is in good company, for popularity is not greatness and few great books have been recognized at true value in the year of their publication. Compared with A Week Walden was a successful book in its first year off the press. But we must not assume that everyone even who bought a copy of Walden in 1854 liked the book or could imagine that it would be remembered a hundred years later. I have a copy of the 1854 Walden in which the original purchaser's presentation note is laid. She writes (for the slip is written in a feminine hand though the name is not indicated): "This seems to be a queer book, but as it is an autobiography must have some value I think -- I thought of getting you Wensley written by Edmund Quincy, but after having read it do not think it worth owning -- I shall get you also North & South instead of the Castle-builder." Doubtless a number of people bought Walden and found it a queer book, as people often nowadays find it a queer

book when by chance they read it.

However, Walden stayed in print through its entire hundred years, not at first because it was popular but because of the habit of the publishers from the good days of Ticknor and Fields to the equally good days of Houghton, Mifflin to keep a book in print. There has been no year when one could not buy a copy of Walden from the original firm or its successor; and for the past quarter-century there has hardly been a year when one could not buy a brand new edition of Walden from one or another publisher -- though sometimes it would have to be a Walden in Czech, or Japanese, or Danish.

Books do not find it easy to arrive at a centennial that is noticed. It takes a hundred years in any case. Some books start bravely like Mrs. Holmes's Tempest and Sunshine, have a great sale for a time, and close the century with less than a line in some literary history or bibliography. Some, like Hiawatha, not only start bravely but run the course of a man's long lifetime very well only to fall in favor before the hundredth year. Hiawatha is ninety-nine years old now. For the first seventy years it did very well indeed; but it is doubtful if there will be any public meeting next year celebrating its centennial. And some books, like Walden, merely hold their own in the current of time for perhaps seventy years and then cut a figure in the literary world.

We may as well admit it. When Walden was fifty years old (in 1904) only a very few enthusiasts would have claimed that it would be remembered, let alone celebrated, for another fifty years. Here and there during the first fifty years someone found Walden and made it his own, put it beside his bed, read it like a bible, and found in another state or across the Atlantic someone to whom he could write about the book and its author. Twenty years later (in 1924) I could buy a copy of the first edition for six dollars, and people were reading Robert Louis Stevenson and Emerson and Elbert Hubbard for inspiration ten-to-one over Thoreau's Walden. Actually, or at least until very recently, Walden had but a few readers. It always had those few, and it sank deep into their lives so that they have been the happy few.

They have been happy because they have had a resource within the book and within themselves because of the book to use in facing their worsening time. It does not matter whether the problem is a Fitchburg railway train that goes thirty miles an hour or whether it is a transatlantic plane that goes ten times that fact, the danger of putting one's faith in rapid communication is the same. Thoreau and those who have lived by his book know that rapidity is not the point. Communication, having something to say, is the point. Farmers were known by Thoreau to be owned by their farms. And it does not matter that 1854 farming was small scale in its operation and 1954 farming is often corporation farming and the mechanized farming that makes a mechanic's cap the badge of a farmer instead of the traditional straw hat. It is just as bad -- it is even worse -- to be owned by a corporation or by a tractor, for a corporation is soulless and a tractor is a machine that fairly symbolizes the mechanization that is driving us mad.

Regardless of what the material progress has been, the lesson of Walden about putting one's trust in physical progress has been an abiding lesson needed more and more by the happy few as they have lived into materialistic times.

They have indeed been a happy few, one or two in a whole city, not even a dozen in some states, influential now and then, but more likely separated people without influence, satisfied with the truth they have found but not evangelical in their zeal to spread the gospel of this bible. After all, Walden teaches that each one must find his own simplification within his own needs. Walden Pond was the way for Thoreau; but it is not the way to simplification for everyone. A book is a tangible thing, a first edition of Walden weighs 15½ ounces, but a book is a poor club by which to pound ideas into another man's head. It may put ideas into your own head; but ideas cannot be forced against another's will. The resistence to ideas is powerful; so those who have accepted the ideas of this hundred year old book have been few at any time and the growing number at the close of the century is still few. They are not, I am convinced, as numerous as the members of the Thoreau Society, for people have joined together in this society for a variety of reasons, because Thoreau interests them in one or another of a dozen ways, and not always because they accept Walden at face value and mean to live by it. After all, this is not the Walden society. It is the Thoreau Society, and Henry Thoreau in his own right might interest naturalists of economic theorists or litterateurs and his history and books might interest scholars, bibliographers and biographers, all of whom might very reasonably not be converts to Walden simplicity. The many editions of Walden have not all been examples of simplicity, and some of them have been made to cost per copy almost as much as Thoreau's house at Walden Pond cost.

The constant popularity of Walden and the bulky sales of these good, bad, and indifferent editions year after year must indicate a growing number of the happy people who for themselves have seen how to face modern materialism. The number grows; but materialism grows too. And fearful evils grow along with it.

As far as the face of this land is concerned in 1954 Walden might just as well never have been written. The conditions the book addressed itself to have intensified since, and new evils have arisen exactly counter to the spirit of Thoreau's book.

Appreciation of nature may have increased in the past century as wildness has retreated still farther from us and nature has become correspondingly more precious. But there is some doubt about even that, for the bulldozer has come into being and is a great destroyer of trees and contours in the name of progress. Billboards have come into commercial prominence where the bulldozer has cut a new highway. And people call these things progress. There is no hesitation to industrialize any area of wildness that may happen to lie in the environs of a city, no hesitation to make beautiful areas ugly military zones

where had been open country. I think a very good case could be made for the proposition that nature appreciation itself has diminished. The young people whom I observe going to the wilderness have a portable radio in one hand and a cooler full of beer cans in the other. They go on the paved roads merely to the edge of nature, using lush cars to get even so far. What Thoreau had to say about the virtues of sauntering and the values of wildness in his essay "Walking" is mere nonsense to them.

We must be entertained and amused by mechanical means in ways that Thoreau would not believe. Of course, we cannot expect him to have conceived of radios and televisions who knew but music boxes and diaramas. But he could never understand the present day attitude toward being amused, the willingness to sink into mere passivity, the boredom with oneself, and the satisfaction felt by being exposed to cheapness, monotony, and vulgarity in the name of entertainment. He had some things to say on the principle involved. But as things have developed and, worse, as they have been accepted nationally, he might just as well never have said them.

Size and cost have become our standards of excellence in a disgusting way. We are taught to be dissatisfied with anything but the latest model, with any but the biggest car, the mechanical kitchen, radiated heat out of the walls or floor somehow, packaged foods that taste of the package. electric blankets because we lack the vitality to keep ourselves warm, bubble baths that are symbolic in that they are tepid, perfumed, and bubbly like the physical lives of the bathers. We are soft as they of 1854 were not soft, life froths and bubbles around us, and we must be assured that every soldier has a turkey dinner by noon on Thanksgiving Day and a Santa Claus in every barracks on Christmas.

This froth covers our inadequacy and our fear, and we will not face those. We lack the will to drive our lives into a corner so as to see what they really are, perhaps because we suspect what they really are and would rather be anywhere else than in that corner. We will not believe that we have nothing to fear but fear; we think we have our neighbors to fear, we think our teachers are subversive and our scientists are traitors. We condemn imagination because it cannot enter with enthusiasm into making the H-bomb, being able to understand destructiveness for the thing that it is. How many things there were about 1854 into which Henry Thoreau could not enter with enthusiasm; and those very things we have still in 1954 now multiplied and magnified. Thoreau was a man of imagination and humanitarianism. He didn't think much of our imperialistic tendencies in 1849. We should not like them so well now.

Our fears go further. We have been cowed by a Middle Western demagogue and the propaganda paid for by Texas oil millionaires into accepting the idea of guilt by accusation. Hitler's method of the big lie works here until we think the government is honeycombed with communists and that only one man can or will do anything about them, though just what he can or will do has not yet appeared. Set that attitude of suspicion and innuendo over against the honesty and straightforwardness of Walden and I think you can see how far we have come. There is a healthiness about Walden that must have impressed all of us; and there is an unhealthiness about our fears and our acquiescence in unfairness that should impress us also.

Our great fear is probably in our inadequacy. We may not fear that we are inadequate militarily, though even there we know we are outnumbered and may be outdistanced in the present arms race. I think we fear our inadequacy in character and stamina. The materialism protested against in 1854 has grown until we began to put our trust in it; and now we fear that we may not be able to buy a decent respect in the opinions of mankind. They could have told us that in 1776. But we would rather threaten countries with the withdrawal of our money than get that decent respect in what would be the truly American way -- an application of genuine democracy at home and abroad.

It may very well be that we are a soft people too. We fear that we may find that out -- as if by not knowing it ourselves no one else would suspect it and find it out. Europe already knows very well our love of sheer physical comfort and our demand for special treatment, and Asia suspects as much. We are fooling noone but ourselves, and ourselves only superficially. So we have this deep fear and turn on one another with accusations and suspicions.

Now set Walden over against that. Here is a fearless book. It does not indulge in accusations; Henry Thoreau looked at himself. His idea of America was not a place of comfort and special protective treatment but a place (as he told the immigrant in the "Baker Farm" chapter) where one did not have to have the luxuries and pamperings in order to hold up his head among his neighbors. Walden shows clearly enough that money will not buy a decent respect in anyone's opinion, domestic or foreign. You cannot think of Walden and the method of the Big Lie at the same time; they are poles apart. The weaseling and diversionary tactics of a McCarthy when cornered are not what Thoreau proposed when he drove life into a corner. He supposed, as we could afford to suppose, that Americans were decently patriotic and loyal and that they would understand how to live better if they faced life as bad as it was rather than ran from it and tried to wash the memory of it out with a bubble bath. He did not go to Walden Pond supposing that life was bad. He assumed it was good but that people generally had got the wrong idea about it, that they were dyspeptic about life when they should be eupeptic, that their mistaken ideas were making it seem worse than it was. There were evils; but a man needed not succumb to those evils; an individual needed not yield to the evils. As he said, he had no idea of writing an ode to dejection. Nor should we write odes to dejection now. Yet we do write such odes and are dyspeptic instead of eupeptic and allow the evils of 1854 to become aggravated and multiplied in 1954 and live in a materialistic and heedless and recriminating and

quailing time when, except for the happy few -- a very few, Walden might as well not have been written nor have lived for its century.

We cannot in the Thoreau Society think that we are the happy few. Some of us may belong to that number; but some of us belong to the complacent number. A society like this may be a gathering of admirers -- those who direct a feeling of wonder toward a hero, those who worship or enjoy, those who are amused by a man's idiosyncrasies and individualities, but those who (like the admirers of many a good man) would rather see than be one. There is not much virtue at the centennial time of Walden in self-congratulation that we are alive at the time. There were, we may suppose, people alive along the roadside near the meeting house at half past nine the morning of November first 1855, and they may have congratulated themselves on being present at exactly the hour when the wonderful one-hoss shay achieved its centennial; but that's all they were -- just alive and happening to be present. The one-hoss shay went to dust while they were there. It had lived its century, everything was over but the shouting, and they were there to do the shouting.

It could be that we stand in that position. The book has lived its century (it does not seem likely to fall at once into a little heap of dust) and we are here to do the shouting. But if all the evils have lived their century too and grown and had new evils added to them, then the book has been as ineffectual as was the one-hoss shay, and the book might as well not have been written (always excepting the happy few who have lived by it and for whom alone perhaps the book was written, as most books are written to but a few). Being present at a centennial is merely an accident of time; we happen to be the people alive in 1954, that's all. But unless the book is alive within us, then we are but a group of presences rather than a cloud of witnesses. A witness is not merely an observer; the word means one who knows and one who testifies, thus one who bears witness -- a very active thing.

Ralph Waldo Emerson in an evil time wrote an ode to his friend William Henry Channing in which he wrote these lines:

Virtue palters; Right is hence;
Freedom praised, but hid;
Funeral eloquence
Rattles the coffin-lid.

Certainly now virtue again palters and is fearful; rightness yields to compromise and expediency. Freedom is indeed praised; but it is hidden rather than practiced. What would have been said a week ago in the Fourth of July orations if we had Fourth of July orations any more would have been funeral eloquence. And we are in danger of similarly praising this book Walden while yielding to the very comforts and superficialities and dangers of chauvinism the book warns against. If the 1840's and 1850's were years that called forth a Walden, then the 1940's and 1950's surely are years that demand that the book be a living thing again, for the years between 1945 and 1954 have shown us a harvest of falsity and fear and fascism in America such as Thoreau never saw between 1845 and 1854. It will not do to indulge in funeral eloquence; it will not do to admire the book and its author. Nothing will do except to witness Walden in the way a few people have witnessed it during its first century by having their very lives cleansed and emboldened by the brave book.

THE ANNUAL MEETING

The 1954 annual meeting of the Thoreau Society was called to order by the president, Raymond Adams, at 10:30 a.m. July 10 in the vestry of the First Parish Church in Concord, Mass. The secretary's report (see bulletin 44) and the treasurer's report (see below) were read and accepted. Since there was no contest for any office, the following individuals nominated were declared elected: for terms of one year--president, Raymond Adams; vice-president, Mrs. Caleb Wheeler; secretary-treasurer, Walter Harding; for terms of three years on the executive committee, Roland Robbins and Carl Bode. Since the president and vice-president announced their determination to retire from office at the end of their present terms, the president appointed a nominating committee consisting of Ralph Chapman, J. Lyndon Shanley, and Mrs. Leslie Anderson to find appropriate candidates for nomination next year. (Suggestions should be sent to Mr. Chapman, 8 Cherry St., Brattleboro, Vt.). The business meeting was adjourned at 11 a.m.

The first speaker of the day was Prof. J. Lyndon Shanley, who read a paper on "The Making of WALDEN," a portion of his forthcoming book on the early drafts of WALDEN. The second paper, by Prof. John Broderick, was on the imagery in WALDEN and will soon be published in the University of Texas Studies in English. After luncheon at the Congregational Church, the presidential address (printed above) was read and a brief report on the two-day seminar on WALDEN was made by the president. At the evening session, Roland Robbins gave an illustrated lecture on his archeological investigations, including the discovery of the cabin site at Walden.

TREASURER'S REPORT

CASH ON HAND, July 1, 1953, $533.86; Annual meeting (1953), $100.00; Printing, $95.25; Postage, $121.82; Misc., $12.79; Total expenditure, $329.86; Income from dues, life memberships and back copies, $297.00; Cash on hand, July 1, 1954, $501.00.

THE WALDEN SEMINAR

Thursday and Friday, July 8 and 9, a closed seminar on Thoreau's WALDEN was held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Caleb Wheeler on Fairhaven Bay in Concord. Participants included Professors Raymond Adams, John Broderick, Walter Harding, Leon Hausman, Carl Kindelien, and J. Lyndon Shanley. The meetings were entirely informal and were devoted to many phases of the study and criticism of WALDEN. No attempt was made to arrive at any concrete conclusions, but all participants heartily agreed that great benefit was derived from the pooling of information.